

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, May 12, 1898, with transcript

ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL TO MABEL (Hubbard) BELL Beinn Bhreagh, C. B.

Thursday, May 12, 1898. Dear Mabel:

Walked up mountain — and witnessed the murder of nine lambs by John McKillop — all males excepting one. If kept for butcher — a barbarous and painful operation necessary.

If a lamb could express his preferences — would undoubtedly prefer to have his throat cut. So John cut their throats, and they simply went to sleep as the blood drained out. We will have their skins tanned — and dispose of the carcasses to the neighbours — to the bear, fox, eagles — and to the pigs. Walked from mountain to Laboratory .

On the mountain pastures noticed that the long dead grass of last year was quite loose — could rake it up in large quantities with the fingers. Did not require to pluck it at all — just lying loose on the ground.

The armful I collected was quite dry and soft — would make splendid packing material like excelsior — or good bedding for cattle — and when mixed with manure — an excellent fertilizer to spread on ground. In present condition a spark would cause quite a conflagration. A pity to waste so much fine bedding for cattle. Tons and tons are lying round loose on the mountain — waiting simply for rain to cause decomposition and etc.

Mr. McInnis will set a man to work tomorrow to see whether this natural hay can be raked into heaps and 2 preserved. Angus Buchanan is out of bedding for the horses and we are going to try this material instead of buying anything. If the experiment is successful — we will have men go over the mountain and collect the dead grass into hay-stacks for use as

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bedding and manure. So much of it — we could fill the large barn with it alone! Worthwhile utilizing.

Have borrowed a cat with two kittens from Angus Buchanan. They may be returned speedily for I find that Maggie and Duncan have as much love for cats as you have!

Duncan Buchanan's sister has come to help Maggie. She seems to have had experience in waiting on table and etc., — and altogether I think will do very well.

Bessie Macrae and Flo Macdougall will come over tomorrow to sort out the magazines, cut pages and etc., and Miss Macdougall will act as my Secretary for the afternoon.

A lot of letters here and I will try dictating to Miss Macdougall. We will have to give them something to eat I expect — which will cause a change of plans. We are only having two meals a day. Mrs. Bell and my father simply taking a glass of milk at your lunch time.

Among letters received is one for you from Lord Kelvin — anent flying machines. I enclose it with this.

Glad to find that newspapers come here as usual — would be lost without them. My father enjoys having them 3 read to him. I have also been reading to him the speech of the Hon. W. C. Jones on the Silver Question — (although as yet I have not come across anything about the subject in it at all.) This speech was forwarded to me by Elsie's Congressional friend from Tennessee. (Whose name I forget) Both my father and I are anxious to read the arguments of the Silver side — for surely there must be something in arguments that have captured so many bright minds in America — and we would like to know what it is — and give it fair consideration. So far I have been unable to see anything but specious reasoning upon false premises.

Grant the premises and you can swallow down the conclusions ad infinitive — but the premises appear to me to be unsound.

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The relative values of things depend upon laws of supply and demand that are beyond our control altogether and it seems to me to be as absurd to attempt to fix, by legislation, the relative values of gold and silver — as to fix by law their relative weights. There can be only one “standard” of measure — whether of value or weight or anything else and it is a mere matter of convenience what standard is adopted. But having adopted any one standard you cannot, by legislation alone, adopt another without displacing the first. Of course, if your legislative act should adopt the real — true — natural relation between the standards they would both hold — but not by virtue of legislation but of natural law.

For example: Our unit of weight we call a pound. Before, however, we can actually measure weight we must fix upon some actual definite concrete thing — as a Standard.

Scientific men adopt a certain volume of distilled water — at a certain temperature as the standard of weight.

We might as well take gold — or silver — or any other substance. It does not matter what we take as our standard, but only we can't fix two — by legislation alone.

We may say that a cubic inch of gold is our standard pound weight. Having fixed this — nature fixes the relative weights of other substances. Under such circumstances it might be that 1 ½ cubic inches of silver would weigh a pound. If a cubic inch of gold weighs a pound — no legislation of 16 to 1 could make 16 cubic inches of silver weigh a pound — a law asserting this might be passed — but it would be of no avail — for as a matter of fact it would not be so. No law could make one cubic inch of gold weigh the same, as 16 cubic inches of silver! It would be quite competent for Congress to adopt a silver standard of weight — but then it must give up the gold. Legislation cannot fix the relative weights of things. You may by legislation make 16 cubic inches of silver your standard pound weight — but in that case your one cubic inch of gold will not be a pound — however much you may declare by legislation that it is so. You can, by legislation fix one standard of weight —

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but you can't fix two. You can't fix, by legislation alone, the relative weights of gold and silver — that is fixed by natural laws beyond our control.

You may make a certain weight of gold — your standard of value — your dollar. Or you may declare sixteen times that weight of silver to constitute your standard dollar.

You may do either of these things but you can't do both — for you cannot by legislation fix the relative values of gold and silver — that is settled by natural laws beyond our control.

If you adopt a certain weight of gold as the standard of value — then natural laws beyond our control determine the amount of silver that is of equivalent value — and we cannot fix it by legislation. If you adopt a certain weight of silver as the standard — then natural laws determine the amount of gold that is of equivalent value — legislation cannot do it.

There is surely a fallacy in the idea that we can have more than one standard of value — or of anything else for that matter.

We can only have one standard and it is simply a matter of convenience as to what it shall be. At present the world has adopted gold. Well we might just as well have silver — it wouldn't make a particle of difference after the standard is fully established. The difficulty lies in the change.

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There would be a disturbance of values in everything which must produce widespread distress for a time. After a period of fluctuation the relative values of things would again become fixed in relation to the new standard by natural law — and all would go on as now — and what would be gained? During the transition from one standard to another great disturbance in the accepted values of things would necessarily be occasioned — involving distress and suffering to multitudes of people — and all for nothing. The relative values of things would assert themselves substantially as they are now in spite of all the legislation in the world. Is the game worth the candle?

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Your loving husband, Alec.